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ON PAGE 14

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OPINION

The thoughts of a skeptic

By David D. Newsom

I would like to believe in the foreign policies of Ronald Reagan.

Like any other American, I wish to see the country "standing tall." Through a life spent substantially overseas, I have seen the impact of our ideals upon the world. I have observed and abhorred totalitarian systems and what they do to the human mind and soul. I would like to see the end of the nuclear threat.

But several aspects of the current approach to our foreign relations bother me and make me strongly skeptical.

First, there are the sweeping generalizations. The one that disturbs me most is the frequently repeated suggestion of large-scale, continuing "Soviet aggression" in the third world. Africa gets special mention. It is true that the Soviets have strong influence in certain key places: Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola. But they have had reverses in Egypt, Congo, and Guinea; nearly 15 African countries can claim genuine independence. The Soviet gains came in the '70s, largely out of the colonial upheaval. They are hardly the basis for an assumption that we are currently losing the third world to an aggressive Soviet empire.

Second, there are the varying estimates of the Russians and their motives. I am not an expert on the Soviet Union, but I have respect for those who have learned the language, studied, and served in the Soviet Union. There are a number of impressive, balanced experts in the United States. They see the threats to our interests. They see the tough, often brutal, character of the Russians and their methods. But they also see them as part of an understandable political system with its pressures and counterpressures, its weaknesses and its vulnerabilities. I cannot help feeling that much of the attitude of the present administration has been formed by people who faced the communist menace in the American labor unions in the 1950s, by conservatives, many with roots in Eastern Europe, who have a visceral feeling — understandable, perhaps — about the Soviet Union, and by strategists who observe the Soviet Union as an adversary in the abstract. Too few seem to be approaching the Soviet Union from the assumption that, however much we may dislike its policies, it is a serious and rational nation and that, with skill and dedication to our interests, we can find a way to live with it.

Third, I am bothered by the differing estimates of the Soviet defense buildup that come out of our government.

From a life in the foreign affairs agencies, I am well aware of the politics of assessments: Each agency seeks to cover itself against the worst contingencies. That is why reports that come from the CIA casting some doubt on other estimates of the Soviet buildup seem to ring particularly true. It is hard to escape the feeling that the nation is being given statistics to support a policy rather than policies based on a truly objective assessment of the threat.

Fourth, in our approach to the third world, I wonder if we are really listening for the true expressions and sentiments of these nations. Too many in the administration, the third-world nations, in the United Nations, in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America seem silent in the face of marked changes in our policies. Their silence is taken to mean acceptance of our current policies — if not their endorsement. I know the awe that many in these countries hold of the United States and the tendency, whatever we may be doing, to tell us what we want to hear. Friends from these areas who suggest that the United States is now less "relevant," that other governments are not speaking out because "no one in Washington is listening," and the undercurrent of violence against the US leads me to be skeptical of claims of US policy successes in the Middle East and Africa, areas where I have had considerable experience.

These policies are, further, being played out against the warping influences of our domestic politics. When congressional support is needed, the decibels are raised; the assessments become more alarmist. During elections, when politicians hesitate to raise fears, much of this is muted. Variations in the tones and substance do not inspire confidence.

The President, I know, derides skeptics. His feeling is that, if there is a will, the United States can do what it wishes. I have, alas, seen the United States falter in the Middle East and in Africa because of an excess of confidence and a lack of perception.

The present administration and its leader have a vision of the world and of this country's place in that world, a vision popular among the American people. I wish I could feel more certain that this vision accurately reflected the real world beyond our borders and that the resultant policies will, in the long term, protect our interests.

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